

Finally, there were sixteen different DSNY trucks and vehicles lined up along the south edge of the tipping floor. The hoppers of three garbage collection trucks had been lifted and welded open as if frozen after releases of garbage onto barges below. The exhibition also included a part aural and acoustic dimension called *Trax for Trucks and Barges*. *Trucks Talk* included selected conversations with sanmen edited from more than a hundred hours of recordings that Ukeles had collected in the past during *Touch Sanitation Performance* (sanmen often told the artist they wished their trucks could talk). The sound of voices emanated from the empty cabs of sanitation trucks in three series: *Mitch*, a “solo performance” by an angry worker, and *Philosophy Facilities*, which each featured ensembles of many voices, and *Sounds of the System*, a composition of “industrial music” recorded and orchestrated by Stephen Erickson. Speakers suspended from the ceiling and in the barge slip allowed the music to saturate the entire space.

In a single moment during the opening event for *Transfer Station Transformation* viewers were directed to turn their gazes to the Hudson River. North of the marine transfer facility a McAllister tugboat approached its way to Fresh Kills Landfill, pulling four tethered, or “married,” barges. During this prelude, another tugboat and two married barges (one old, one new) engaged in an elegant pas de deux in a sweeping circle from New York to the New Jersey side of the Hudson River. At the conclusion of *Touch Sanitation Show: Marrying the Barges: A Barge Ballet* the barges were “married” into the barge slip. They remained there for the run of the six-month exhibition, as if awaiting loads of garbage from the poised sanitation trucks or old work gloves from the descending trough. This was the artist’s *Transfer Ballet*, and through it she learned about not only the intricacies, mechanics, and turning radius of boats and barges, but also the unpredictability of currents and the regularity of tides, and the fact that fluvial motions do not always align with human-made schedules and events.

For the opening of *Touch Sanitation Show: Part 2* on the same day, the barges made their way on chartered buses or other forms of transportation from the marine transfer station to Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc., on West Street in SoHo to see *Touch Sanitation Show: Part 2. Maintenance City / Sanman's Place*. The largest space of the gallery was completely covered, hanging every wall with 1,169 screenprints, each layered with work-related images and overprinted with a clock face designating a single eight-hour shift. Some prints incorporated working clocks. The color of the prints changed by season, and together they represented an entire year, divided into three eight-hour shifts per day. Suspended overhead was a vast, transparent map of New York that vividly conveyed the spatial expanse and temporal conditions of urban sanitation. The map was pierced by four towers

START HERE

TOUCH SANITATION SHOW: PART 1. TRANSFER STATION TRANSFORMATION AND MARRYING THE BARGES: A BARGE BALLET; PART 2. MAINTENANCE CITY / SANMAN'S PLACE AND CLEANSING THE BAD NAMES, 1984

Part 1: 65,000-square-foot site-specific installation at the West Fifty-Ninth Street Marine Transfer Station, New York: sixteen sanitation vehicles, two barges, flashers from forty-four decommissioned collection trucks, suspended trough holding dirty work gloves, assorted support equipment, cages of recyclable materials, text cut into end wall, and a mound of salt. Includes a multi-track soundwork, *Trax for Trucks and Barges*, created in collaboration with Stephen Erikson. Part 2: Installation at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc., New York: screenprinted work-shift clocks, 1,500-square-foot transparent map of New York suspended from the ceiling, video installation on thirty-four monitors, telex machine, and vest. New and used plumbing, furniture, and other mongro objects collected from DSNY facilities. Created over five years in collaboration with DSNY.

In 1984 Ukeles initiated the two-part *Touch Sanitation Show*, drawn from her experiences doing *Touch Sanitation Performance*.¹ Part 1 was staged at the West Fifty-Ninth Street Marine Transfer Station on the Hudson River and was composed of *Transfer Station Transformation* and the performance *Marrying the Barges: A Barge Ballet*. Part 2, staged simultaneously at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc. in SoHo, comprised *Maintenance City / Sanman's Place* and the performance *Cleansing the Bad Names*.

Ukeles's installation at the West Fifty-Ninth Street Marine Transfer Station was a glorious anthropological extravaganza of often immense artifacts representing the tools, vehicles, equipment, and technology required to sustain New York City and its millions of residents. This ambitious project, produced in collaboration with DSNY and sponsored by Creative Time, Inc., began with a conceptual map of the transfer station that offers important insights into how the artist has embarked on some of her magnificently scaled projects with DSNY and other collaborators.

As the initial sketches and plans indicate, the entire transfer station ultimately became a complete artwork. At the entrance of the building Ukeles shaped a mound (a form that would be seen again in her later work) of white salt that served as a luminous beacon to the building's ramp and tipping floor. On the south side of the tipping floor, where collection trucks dumped trash onto barges for transport to Fresh Kills Landfill, Ukeles arranged sixteen pieces of heavy-duty equipment and vehicles engaged in collection, disposal, and street cleaning. The north side of the tipping floor had clusters of smaller equipment, including sweeper brooms, snowplows and chains, and other things that supported the trucks and barges.

Guided by an overhead light work composed of pulsing flashers from the backs of forty-four garbage trucks, viewers encountered an atthey wagon and clamshell bucket from the landfill, sweepers, mechanical brooms, snowplows, pan scrapers, a residue truck, a front-end loader, methane extraction and pollution testing equipment, and many other artifacts and pieces of equipment required to conduct municipal maintenance. A sense of the scale, measurement, metrics, and weight of the sanitation process, along with the complexity, cost, and labor required to "keep New York City alive," was physically appreciable through this highly orchestrated visual and aural display.

Opening the same day was *Maintenance City/Sanman's Place*, in which one room of Feldman's SoHo gallery was covered floor to ceiling with screen-printed clock faces depicting an entire year of work shifts, and another furnished entirely with furniture and other items that had been saved by Sanitation workers from the flow of trash. This was also where Ukeles staged a performance inspired by a particular conversation she had while still engaged in *Touch Sanitation Performance*. On February 5, 1980, she shook hands and had a conversation with a sanman standing by his collection vehicle at a truck-fed Brooklyn landfill. She recalls him saying:

"17 years ago, it was very hot. We stopped for a break, and sat down on some lady's porch steps. The lady came out of her house and said: 'Get away from here you smelly garbagemen. I don't want you stinking up my porch.' That stuck in my throat for all of these 17 years: Today, you wipe that out: Will you remember that?"²



Flyer for *Touch Sanitation Show*, 1984.

The question with which he concluded his story has been both a challenge and a summons to Ukeles. Several years later (and many years after he first experienced the woman's scorn and disgust) the artist demonstrated in the most deeply felt way that she had remembered. As part of *Touch Sanitation Show: Part 2* Ukeles rebuilt the "lady's porch" in front of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc., with a two-story scaffold on either side, and watched as almost two hundred people ascended the scaffolds to scour and remove forever the disturbing and demoralizing stink of one man's haunting and humiliating memory. This performance was titled *Cleansing the Bad Names*.

1. *Touch Sanitation Show: Part 1* took place from September 9 through October 8, 1984, and had two components: *Transfer Station Transformation* and *Marrying the Barges: A Barge Ballet*. The opening of the installation at the West Fifty-Ninth Street Marine Transfer Station and the performance of *Marrying of the Barges* were attended by more than two thousand people.

2. Document in the artist's files, DSNY.



Curated by Lucy Lippard, May Stevens, and Margaret Harrison, *ISSUE: Social Strategies by Women Artists* featured artists from the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany, Israel, and Turkey. Ukeles's contribution to the exhibition included an installation of photographs, maps, drawings, audio recordings, and other documentation from *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1979–80). For a collateral performance the artist used many pairs of clean DSNY work gloves she had brought with her from New York, to exchange with clean gloves from London's dustmen (as the city's sanitation workers were called) to create *International Glove Exchange: After the Revolution, Who's Going to Pick Up the Garbage on Monday Morning?* The entire performance lasted twenty-four hours and took place in two boroughs of London: Kensington (home to the Institute of Contemporary



Arts and site of *ISSUE*) and Islington, a poorer nearby neighborhood. In addition to collecting and exchanging gloves, Ukeles accompanied dustmen on their routes from collection to disposal in both boroughs. At the conclusion of the performance the National Union of Public Employees gave the artist a pin signifying that she had become an honorary member.

1982

WALLS OF STRESS/BOWLS OF DEVOTION

1982. Installation at the Martin Luther King Jr. Labor Center, District 1199 Gallery, New York. Sheets, plastic gloves, metal bowls, IV poles, IV tubing, medical stretcher, clipboards, binders, screen-printed work-clocks, handwritten labels, and typewritten and handwritten texts, 10 x 18 x 8 ft. (3 x 5.5 x 2.4 m).

As part of Bread and Roses, a cultural program launched by the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees, Ukeles chose to focus on the working conditions of healthcare professionals, whose devoted efforts she had witnessed while her young daughter Raquel was gravely ill and in the hospital. *Walls of Stress/Bowls of Devotion* also was inspired by the work of New York University sociologist Patricia Sexton, stepmother of former DSNY Commissioner Brendan Sexton and author of *The New Nightingales*, a study of hospital workers and unions. Deploying hospital equipment provided by the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation and with assistance from the Materials for the Arts Program supported by the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, Ukeles created an installation that included a wall of photocopied clocks representing the intense work schedules of hospital employees (some of which follow the erratic patterns and temporal chaos of illness), along with columns of clean, stacked



sheets, a stretcher with I.V. poles, and fourteen five-quart stainless steel bowls, each holding evocative objects signifying the devotion, encouragement, and concern of healthcare employees during her daughter's illness and recovery. At a particularly frightening moment Ukeles had asked her daughter what she was thinking. She had responded that she was telling herself *Batman* stories. This began a process of Raquel reciting her stories and Ukeles writing them down and collecting them as "Batman in the Hospital." The artist later read these hospital stories during a performance at Franklin Furnace on January 11, 1977.

THIS ONE

I ask you these two questions after Hurricane Sandy:
What keeps New York City alive?
What does the City need to do to survive after Sandy?
Then I ask that you offer your ideas, your feelings, your
experiences, your fears, your visions on the following pages."

I first distributed a similar questionnaire during the fiscal crisis in New York City in 1976 as part of a performance artwork, called *Maintaining NYC in Crisis: What Keeps NYC Alive?* It is time to talk about this again today—especially now.¹

On January 13, 2013, from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., Ukeles engaged in a series of fifteen-minute conversations with visitors and employees of the Brooklyn Museum. A striking moment occurred when the artist spoke with Margaret Johnson, who had been washing windows in the museum lobby while Ukeles talked with other people. Johnson eventually stopped her work and somewhat reluctantly sat down to talk with the artist. She explained that she was a cancer survivor—and that the illness had left her bedridden



for a year and devastated her family's financial resources and emotional reserves. She admitted that her greatest fear was not "knowing if [she was] going to be here tomorrow." Engaging in conversations, often with people she does not know, has been a persistent part of Ukeles's work. These encounters are typically touching, affirming, difficult, and constitutively filled with unexpected moments.

1. Mierle Laderman Ukeles, invitation for Brooklyn Museum performance, January 13, 2013, artist's files located in her artist in residence office at the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY).

2013

SERVING . . .

June 6, 2013. Participatory performance with Sanitation workers from Manhattan District 4 at The Kitchen, New York.

Throughout her career Ukeles has collaborated with students and fellows from the Whitney Independent Study Program (ISP) on several occasions. In 2013, four curatorial fellows (Nina Horisaki-Christens, Andrea Neustein, Victoria Rogers, and Jason Waite) organized the exhibition and published the book *Maintenance Required*. The show featured artists and collectives (including Ukeles) whose work explores and examines maintenance. As the curators wrote: "Often repetitive and mundane, this work maintains the objects, structures, and institutions that undergird our constant struggle against entropy and decay. Thus maintenance takes form not only through labor, but also through the entire system of individuals, objects, and infrastructures that connect our daily lives."¹ On June 6, Ukeles, along with the four ISP Fellows, created the performance work *Serving . . .* The invitation to the performance was extended to Sanitation workers who worked heroically throughout Chelsea after Hurricane Sandy's devastating storm surge flooded the entire area in late October 2012. While doing their daunting work to save many galleries and artworks, they had slept in a DSNY garage for thirteen consecutive nights. At noon on the day of the performance, Sanitation worker guests were seated



Curators Nina Horisaki-Christians and Victoria Rogers serving lunch to Sanitation workers.

and served an elaborate lunch by Ukeles and ISP curators in an act of gratitude and respect for their dedication and service. Other dignitaries also were invited, and visitors to the exhibition were encouraged to bring their own snacks and join in. The conversation between visitors and Sanitation workers lasted well beyond lunch; finally, the curatorial students stopped the performance to allow their guests to return to work.

1. Benjamin Young, ed., *Maintenance Required*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program, 2013), 1.

THIS ONE!